

## *Equity Spotlight Podcast Series*

Dr. Seena Skelton, Director, MAP Center  
Dr. Ruthie Payno-Simmons, Associate Director, MAP Center

### TRANSCRIPTION

**Center Announcer:** Welcome to the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center *Equity Spotlight Podcast Series*. Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access, representation, and participation, to realize quality outcomes for historically disenfranchised students closest to historic harm, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, as well as how this impacts students with disabilities, and efforts towards socioeconomic integration within school systems.

**Robin G. Jackson:** Hello. Welcome to the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center's *Equity Spotlight Podcast Series*. My name is Robin Jackson, Research Development & Dissemination Specialist, and I'm joined by Dr. Seena Skelton, Director of the MAP Center, and Dr. Ruthie Payno-Simmons, Associate Director of the MAP Center. Welcome.

**Dr. Skelton:** Good afternoon, Robin. Hello.

**Dr. Payno-Simmons:** Good afternoon, Robin.

**Robin G. Jackson:** Today's conversation is entitled *Exploring Rightful Presence as an Equitable Standard in Educational Policy and Practice*. Every year at the MAP Center, we choose a theme by which we ground all of our projects and approaches to the work we do with and for educators. This year, our theme is centered on the term rightful presence. So, this brings us to our first question. I was really intrigued by this idea of rightful presence when you all first presented it earlier this year. It's why I really wanted to do this podcast or something to be able to

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get this idea of rightful presence into the hands of our educators and all the folks who come to our website and indulge in our products. So, the first question, then, is: what is rightful presence, and how does it relate to educational equity?

**Dr. Skelton:**

Yeah, I don't mind. I'll kick us off. Yeah. When I first read about this concept of rightful presence as it applies to really how we are supporting diverse students, particularly those students who've been historically--continue to be marginalized and minoritized in our schools, it was an idea that really resonated with me for a variety of reasons. One is that the framers of rightful presence, in the context of education, Angela Calabrese and Edna Tan, talks about this as a way of reconceptualizing what we think of when we talk about inclusion, or inclusive practices. And in a way that pushes back on, really, the frameworks and barriers that we have in our education system, where inclusion...the idea of inclusion has not been able to really break through.

**Dr. Skelton:**

And so, this idea of rightful presence really requires us to contend with those barriers, right? This, this idea of challenging, really, the, the power imbalance that is sort of inherent in the concept of inclusion. Which is, in many ways, you have context, you have classrooms, you have schools, you have settings that are designed for those individuals who embody dominant identities. So, whether we're talking about students with disabilities, whether we're talking about racialized or gendered identities, that this idea of inclusion is

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that you have this context, that really...that's really created with those individuals in mind, and, and inclusion is asking us to invite individuals who do not embody those dominant identities into that, into that space to create a space where they are welcomed and supported, right? Inviting them into that space.

### **Dr. Skelton:**

What rightful presence, and what Calabrese and Tan talks about is that, that in of itself does not disrupt the power imbalance, because you have the, the power to invite someone, then you have the power to disinvite someone as well, right? And also, it requires this sort of conformity. If you conform to the way things are, you are invited to assimilate into that space. It does not contend with those aspects of those spaces that are in fact inevitable, right? And so, what rightful presence does is that it states that really, "We're here. People are here in these spaces. They have a right to be in these spaces, and not to have to fit in, but that those spaces themselves need to be restructured." This idea of "rights" need to be reauthored with everyone as authors to the rights of that space. And then, what then will the new space, the transformed space, look like, feel like, and sound like. So, the idea of rightful presence really resonated with me, and I think captured what was kind of missing in the way that inclusion has been taken up in our schools.

### **Robin G. Jackson:**

Thank you, Seena. Ruthie, as Seena was talking, I was really appreciating the frame that she gave us. But also thinking about a lot of our professional development that we do with our partners, and

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how a lot of times, especially when we're talking about foundational concepts, we foreground our very robust definition of educational equity. So, I'm wondering, then, if you can speak to that part of the question, then how does rightful presence, then, kind of fold itself into the way that the MAP Center defines educational equity?

**Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

Yeah. Thank you, Robin. And thank you, Seena, for that framing. I think that it's always good to start with that definition because then you can see clearly the alignment between the two, and how they're connected. And so, you know, educational equity occurs when educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources are representative of, constructed by and responsive to all people, so that each person has access to, meaningfully participates in, and has access to high quality learning experiences and outcomes. And it all happens with an appreciation of the individual characteristics and group memberships. And so, when I think about that, I think about the constructs of educational equity, that's the Center's definition, and I think about meaningful participation and representation.

**Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

When I can show up, or when a student can show up, as their authentic self, and engage in educational endeavors without having to give up parts of who they are, they're rightfully present. The space has been cultivated for them to be in that space. When they are able to meaningfully participate by giving feedback on how the systems are either set up to support them, or how systems may be set up that

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presents barriers or does harm, they're able to meaningfully participate.

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

And when those on the receiving end of that feedback, or that input from students actually take what they're saying and begin to change the environment, as Dr. Skelton said, rather than asking the student to change who they are, that really undergirds the idea of rightful presence. And so, the two definitions are very, very much connected because you're talking about representation, and you're talking about meaningful participation, which ultimately leads to positive outcomes for students who've been pushed to the margins.

### **Robin G. Jackson:**

Thank you, Ruthie. This really gets me thinking about, like, the current state of education. The reason why the MAP Center is still in existence, in addition to other technical assistance organizations, how the work is still ongoing. Especially with our work with educators, I'm wondering, then, how you all would convey this, this story, this imperative to educators in the work that they're doing every day? So, why do you think it is imperative to shift towards the spirit of rightful presence in their work with students?

### **Dr. Skelton:**

Yeah, that's a great question, Robin. And, and Ruthie, I appreciate the alignment that you've made very overt between sort of these two concepts of rightful presence and the Center's definition, our definition of educational equity, because you're absolutely right. They're very complementary and, and, and supportive of each other.

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More, more than just aligned, they're actually, you know, very much...I think almost communicating the same thing, but in different, in different ways, right, using different, different language.

**Dr. Skelton:**

And, it is, I...it is imperative that our, our educators sort of understand this, this idea of rightful presence, particularly in our current, just, landscape, our current legislative landscape. And that's around this, this notion that all of our children, and all of our families, and all of our educators, with all of their embodied identities, have a right to be where they are. Have a right to be in our schools. Have a right to be in our school communities. And they're...and they are there, you know? We are all here. It is not sort of a future kind of "one day." You know, one day, but it's, it's, it's children are in our schools today. Families are in our communities right now. Our educators are, are educating and teaching right now, who all embody various multiple identities. And, and in many, in many of our students and family members, educators, embody multiple identities that are marginalized.

**Dr. Skelton:**

And this is happening. This is who where we are today. This idea of, of, you know, presence, is, you know, is present. Their presence, our presence is present. And it's, it's, it's...the notion of rightful presence help us understand that the, the location of this work is the here and now. It is not some abstract future. And if you think about, you know, some of the, the tenets of rightful, rightful presence, that's one of the tenets, is that...is making the presence of, of, of children, of families,

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of educators who are minoritized, making their presence, and what that means, present and, and overt, and right in here and now, not some abstract future.

### **Dr. Skelton:**

And as we all carry with us, our, our histories, our...just our histories, right, our...what we bring to the space, the challenges, as well as the assets. And these are all aspects that we have to contend with right now, right? And so, for our educators to...I think, I think it's empowering for our educators to understand: this is work that can be done in here and now. It is not some abstract kind of nebulous kind of idea, and that the work is that the collaboration of working together to what, what's called, you know, reauthor or rewrite or re, reimagine what it means to have an environment where everyone is recognized, when everyone is, is honored in all of our differences and similarities, and that we all equitably have the power to co-create something, a place that is supportive of, of all, and where you don't have to try to be someone else in order to be accepted, in order to be supported, in order to be in an environment where you have access to quality learning and social interactions.

### **Dr. Skelton:**

And so, rightful presence is about the present, and it's important that our educators kind of really understand that, and be able to think about, ok, "What does this mean for my everyday practice in the here and now?" You know? "What does this mean as I'm making moment to moment decisions in the here and now? What does it mean to

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have a framing of rightful presence of all of my students and their families?

**Robin G. Jackson:**

Ruthie...thank you, Seena. I, I love listening to you talk, Seena, because you always make me think of the next thing that I'm really wondering about. So, I know that I framed the question in terms of how can educators...why should educators begin to move towards rightful, rightful presence in their practice. But something you said made me wonder then, Ruthie, how, then, can this extend to the educators themselves, and in their interactions with each other? So, what does rightful presence, then, look like for the educators themselves? And how might that, then, affect their practices with students?

**Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

Yeah, I appreciate that. I think that when educators really fully embody what it means to ensure rightful presence for all, but especially for students, and adults, and educators that are often minoritized...minoritized or marginalized, they shift from performative types of work to transformative types of work. I think that they...they don't just begin to use language like what I'm hearing now: if we went from equity and...diversity and equity, to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and now we're doing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. And, initially, when I was hearing that, I had such a, like, a reaction to it because I was in spaces where I felt like the adult themselves weren't really giving attention to understanding the ways in which they showed up, and how it was still invitational.



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### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

It wasn't really thinking about reauthorizing rights and creating spaces where everyone gets to show up, as Seena was saying, as their authentic selves. And in that authenticity, there's something very valuable that each person brings into the space. And when I think about that, it will also support adults thinking about how they're engaging with students. And we've worked with partners where we've seen those transformative moments where they shifted from asking students maybe to provide feedback, to centering students in the actual work. To centering their voices as the leader. So, shifting from that spectrum of student voice-oriented activity framework that we leverage from time to time, from kind of expressing what they think, to actually being the leaders engaging in the work, the students themselves. And the students and adults co-framing and co-designing educational spaces.

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

I think that it creates this shift from saying that we're doing the work, but still showing up in ways that's harmful, still showing up and putting things in place without really considering the, the input and the incredible talent and ideas that our young people bring to the space, to actually let that be the transformation part of the process. So, adults would then shift from, you know, thinking that they're providing this invitation in this really nice way, to actually decentering themselves to some ways to center the students that are in that community, and their families, and their funds of knowledge, and the things that they...the visions that they have for themselves to

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achieve the things that they want to achieve. It shifts how work is being done.

**Dr. Skelton:**

Ruthie, as I'm listening to you, you know, what that is...what I'm drawing a connection to that's also a part of one of the tenets of rightful presence, is this notion of disrupting our current idea of power dynamics, right? So, so, in order to authentically...to shift from getting input from students, to actually having students be co-creators in...what a, what, what a classroom, what a school looks like in, in function, and, and co-creators of...authors of those rules and, and, and norms, right. That is, that is moving from an authority dynamic where the adults or the principal or the teacher, or whomever has all the power, to then give to or allow others to react to.

**Dr. Skelton:**

Shifting from that to really distributing the power, right, to among those who are part of the learning community, including our, our students, and, you know, and from, from our perspective, from the MAP Center's perspective, those students who have been historically marginalized, right? Making sure that not only do they have the input, which is again, that sort of traditional power, you know, "I have the power and I can give you input, but I still make the decision." Versus, "Let's co-create together. Let's co-learn, let's co-create, let's co," you know, to use, you know, your, your, you know, term from Calabrese and Tan, "to coauthor. To co- and reauthor what these rights look like, what these rights feel like, how these

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rights are then manifested.” So yeah, I, I appreciate, you know, the distinction from input to really sort of centering the, the perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized.

**Robin G. Jackson:**

What you all are talking about is such a shift from the way that we have been socialized into public K-through-12 schools, where students come into a space, they sit...what Freire called “the banking method.” They get the information, they regurgitate it in tests or in homework, and then that’s it. This is...this sounds more like a community being built, like an authentic community being built between educators and students. And I’m always a champion for student voice, so I think this is probably another reason why I was so drawn to this concept. It’s just another way to empower students to really just kind of build their, their self-efficacy, and then invest in their own education in authentic ways, not in...not in performative ways like you mentioned earlier, Ruthie, but in authentic ways. So that, then, they can go out into the world and be thinkers: teaching them to think, rather than teaching them what to think, right?

**Robin G. Jackson:**

And you all both kind of already answered this last question, but I’m going to ask it anyway just in case there’s something else you want to add. So, my last question for the both of you is: what are some practical entry points for educators to begin welcoming and demonstrating a rightful presence mindset? So, like an educator listening to this now is like, “Yes, this sounds great. I want to begin starting this in my classroom, in my educational space.” Where do

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they begin? How can they begin to empower themselves to shift the culture of the space towards rightful presence?

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

My apologies. I appreciate that. I'm going to just...I was thinking of an actual example when you all were talking, and I want to share it. I was trying to determine did it, did it fit, but it does. You know, I...when I served as a principal, I worked in a space where it shifted from being in a...more of an inner city school where, where students came in, and they came in and that “banking method” was pretty much going on, I think. And I went into a school community as a principal where students had a lot of privilege. And I remember--this is a kindergarten through fourth grade building--and I remember we shifted so that students could eat lunch--I mean, play first, go outside for recess first, and then eat. And it addressed a lot of issues. But one of the things that I didn't realize was how students would feel about it. I was thinking more about their wellbeing from my perspective.

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

And these kindergarten to fourth grade students actually started kind of campaigning not to have it. And I remember they actually went around and got a bunch of people to sign a document saying they wanted to switch things back. And I had this opportunity in the moment to, to respond to that when they came to the office with that. My initial response was, “We're the adults. We know better. That's why we're doing this. We have data, we're making these decisions.” That's how I really felt if I'm honest. But then I started thinking about,

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here we are with students. They are demonstrating their voice, and, and sharing what they feel like works for them. So, I had a round table in my office, and those leaders of that, you know, who came with that petition to change things back, they sat and they shared all their reasons why they did not like the way that things were.

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

And I actually sat and I listened, and they had some really important things that I needed to think about. We did not change things back, but we changed how we were doing things based on the feedback that they provided. And so, to me, rightful presence was demonstrated when those students were able to come in that office and share their dismay with the decision that had been made, why it was problematic, and what they wanted to see done about it. To then actually hear them, and then to be responsive to the fact that they understood they had the right to share what they thought was going to be better for them. And I don't know if I'm putting it in the, in the right...you know, I'm not saying it in full detail, but it was a moment where I had to make a shift as an adult to say, "I may think that we're making the right decisions for these 350 students. But now I have six students who got petition...they had so many students put their names on this document. What is it that they feel like would make this work for them?"

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

And through that conversation, we made shifts that worked for everyone. So, I just feel like giving an example is helpful when, when students come and share, that they want to see something different,

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or they have a problem with something, or they have an idea. The first part of that, getting to your question, is having the relationships. Making sure that you have made...you've gotten to know your students, you've built relationships where they know they can approach you, they can approach situations and have those conversations. Creating safe spaces that there won't...students won't feel like there's a backlash when they come and share their dismay or their ideas about improving things. And then actually allowing...making sure that they can see what they have recommended be reflected in the decisions that are being made.

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

And so, building relationships, I think, becomes really important, creating safe spaces where students can come and, and share information. Cultivating spaces where you're actually not just waiting for them to come to you, but you're going to them and asking them for their, for their thoughts. From that, we had a student council that developed to, to make sure we were getting input and engaging in conversations regularly. And I think engaging in professional learning is the last one I'll say for now, around cultivating critical consciousness. Because I think if you want to do this work, we got to start by understanding who we are, how we come to be who we are, how we come to have the world view we have, and how that actually impacts the systems that we're putting in place in the structures that we're building. And how that often will benefit those who are more like us, than those who may have different experiences and, and viewpoints which are equally important. And so, engaging critical

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consciousness allows us to understand how our identities come to be shaped, teaches us how to engage in ongoing self-reflection about who we are and the decisions that we're making, and how that impacts others, how some identities are centered, and some are not. I think that, that is a foundational piece.

**Robin G. Jackson:** Thank you, Ruthie.

**Dr. Skelton:** That's a great example, Ruthie. And one, one of the things I want to do is, with...with, if...with your permission, with your example, sort of annotate the, the tenets of rightful presence, because I think that, you know...one of the, one of the...something that often happens with new framings and ideas and concepts is that they get, they get, particularly ones with really resonating titles, they get sort of taken up and then kind of that term, the terminology then gets used without a thorough understanding of what the concept means. And, in many ways, it loses its value because it gets sort of...it turns into a label that's then put on all kinds of things, whether or not it really reflects the, the core ideas of, of, of the, of the term, of the framework.

**Dr. Skelton:** And so, you know, Robin, you asked what can teachers do, educators do? First of all, they can they can read. They can read the Calabrese and Tan's article, and articles...There are a number of books now that really delve into the concept of rightful presence as it relates to education. Because this idea really comes out of different types of...the idea of rightful presence comes out of a different type

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of literature base, that was then sort of studied and then, and then applied to this concept in, in the field of education. And so, really, you know, as, as Ruthie ended on, professional development is so key to understand this concept. What does rightful presence really mean, beyond just a really you know, beyond the words itself, right? What does it...what does this framework or this concept really mean?

**Dr. Skelton:**

So, to study, to read, to talk with each other, you know, fellow colleagues about these ideas. I know we can't get into it in this particular podcast, but I know that we're working with one district, and, and Ruthie in particular is working with one district, that did just that. They engaged in some self-study around this concept of rightful presence before they did anything. So, they, they, they read about it, they learned about it, discussed it. And then they thought about, "Ok, how does this apply to our, you know, to our context, to our district." So, that's the first and foremost, not to just pick up something because it sounds really cool, and then kind of run with it, really to engage in studies.

**Dr. Skelton:**

But, but just really quickly, just to kind of annotate. You know, when Ruthie talked about that the...the students didn't like the decision. And, and, and they...they had some critique. So, the...really the first tenet around rightful presence is that struggle is, is integral to learning, right? Tension is a core part of learning. And so, for...you know, often as adults, we sort of emphasize compliance,



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compliance, compliance, and we, and we...anything that brings us tension or struggle we try to avoid. But the learning's in this tension, the learning is in the struggle. And so, really the first tenet is around, you know, this notion of political struggle or struggle around activity or action is an integral part of learning. It's, it's a part of...it's, it's a part of reauthoring the rights by first acknowledging and being comfortable with, with the notion of struggle, right? That's first.

**Dr. Skelton:**

And the, and then Ruthie's example, the students struggled with the new policy. There was tension, they critiqued, and they brought that tension to the administrator. And so, the administrator, Ruthie being that administrator, had to engage in that struggle with those students. She didn't shut it down, she didn't avoid it. She didn't say, "Don't come to me, this is the way it is." She contended with the struggle of that...with, with, with those children in terms of how they were experiencing this new policy. Understanding that these children are engaged in a critical thinking and critical action and wanted to support that to be responsive to that.

**Dr. Skelton:**

The second tenet that's around rightful presence is this notion of making visible, or making perceivable to use a broader term, making perceivable the intersections of justice and injustice, or equity or inequity, or in, in, in, in very real words, what's working and what's not working, right. And two things could be true at the same time, right? So, the notion of the...a change in the time of the lunch and the recess, you know? The adults had, had a point, had reasons and

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rationale, and so did the students. And both can be true, right? Both can be, be, can, can, can be...we could hold those two concepts at the same time. And so, continuing with that, here in the present, here's where these two particular perspectives on this policy is sort of manifesting. And, in the present, but this idea of then working to reorient towards the future.

### **Dr. Skelton:**

So, what can we do in the...so that the future can be a, a future that is supportive of both perspectives, right? And so, that's what again, Ruthie talked about the idea of listening to what the students had to say, and learning from what they share, and then making some changes to contend with, "Here's what's working well. Here's what's working not so well. And here's how we can co-, again, cocreate to a better future that's supportive of everyone," right? And that's that second tenet.

### **Dr. Skelton:**

And then the third tenet is around the culture of disruption towards justice, right? So, this notion that creating, you know, in...clearly in that school, there was a culture created where students felt safe and comfortable to bring their thoughts to the principal. Clearly, that was a culture that was established, a climate that was established. This, this culture and climate that it's okay to, to ask questions. It's okay to, to, to disrupt in this very constructive manner, right? And so, that culture of sort of, of disruption towards justice. So not disruption for disruption's sake, but disruptive towards justice and cultivating a safe

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environment for, for the students to feel safe, for the adults to feel safe.

### **Dr. Skelton:**

And so, those are three tenets of rightful presence. And just to sort of annotate that example of how those tenets are, you know, were, were played out in this particular example. But these tenets can be played out in different ways as, you know, educators become more familiar with this concept.

### **Dr. Payno-Simmons:**

I appreciate that. I just...I appreciate you taking time to apply that particular example to those three tenets. And as you were talking, I think the only other thing I want to add is that I saw each of them for the adults as well, going back to that question that you had asked earlier, in terms of what it mean-- what does it mean for adults? That political struggle was something that I had to actually deal with as a result of students coming as well, for multiple reasons. And then the whole idea of engaging and looking at what wasn't working, and what was working. Like, there was learning on my part as an adult, which then translated to learning for the staff because we were making decisions, not just from the principal's office. These decisions have been vetted through the staff. So, that then have to go back to the staff and have a conversation around shifts we were going to make based on this new information from the students. I had to navigate that.

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**Dr. Payno-Simmons:** So, when we engage in work around rightful presence, there, there...it's beneficial to, to everyone. And the solutions were very powerful, because we included the perspectives of students that we hadn't ruled-out that part of the decision-making. We were just thinking about what would be best to do, "A, B, and C," to address these things that we were seeing, and it really changed our approach. We stopped making decisions amongst the adults solely, to really starting to ask students what their thoughts were as we were making future, you know, decisions. And we were emergent, but it was transformative, if that makes sense.

**Robin G. Jackson:** It does. It does. And Seena, I too appreciate you annotating Ruthie's example because I love to see the connection between theory and action, and you provided that when you did that, so I appreciate that. This has been a really great conversation, and I'm so excited to be able to share this concept of rightful presence in a way that will be beneficial to our listeners, to our partners, whoever will engage in this podcast. But also, this podcast will be able to kind of double as a tool for educators, or whoever engages in the podcast, to be able to then begin their journey towards an additional way to make their educational spaces equitable. So, I appreciate the conversation. Ruthie, did you have anything you wanted to add?

**Dr. Payno-Simmons:** Yes. My cup runneth over now. But anyway, I just remembered what I wanted to add, and that was: it pushed me in my own journey of becoming aware to understand that the school belonged to the

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students and the community. And, and that changed a lot of my approach. It, it made me think about when we talk about being culturally responsive, we have to be that. We have to be responsive to that. And so, I remember having thoughts in my mind, “But this is their school. It is ours, but it's theirs.” You know, it just shifted my thinking, which impacted everything that came after that.

**Robin G. Jackson:**

Beautiful. Thank you for adding that, Ruthie. Thank you. And I...in the both of you, I see you all not just talking about this, but actually operationalizing it. So, I appreciate that as well.

*[Audience clapping sound byte]*

**Robin G. Jackson:**

Thank you all for tuning in to this *Equity Spotlight Podcast Series* conversation. We hope that you all were inspired by today's dialogue and are able to take some or all of it back to your spaces. Please share this podcast with anyone you think may benefit. Finally, if you're not following us on social media, why not? You can find us on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. That information will be able to be found in the episode notes on our website. Also, please subscribe to our publication so that you may be notified of resources like this, our *Equity Tools*, *Equity Newsletters*, recorded virtual events, as well as our upcoming live events. Drs. Payno-Simmons and Skelton, any closing words?

**Dr. Skelton:**

This has been delightful. Thank you, Robin.



# Exploring Rightful Presence as an Equitable Standard in Educational Policy and Practice



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**Dr. Payno-Simmons:** Thank you so much. It has been.

**Robin G. Jackson:** Thank you.

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Equity Assistance Center and Director of Operations of the Great Lakes Equity Center; Dr. Ruthie Payno-Simmons, Associate Director of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center; and Dr. Crystal Morton, Director of Research for the Great Lakes Equity Center, for their leadership and guidance in the development of all tools and resources to support the region.

[End of Audio]